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About this Course - Managing Your Distance Course

This course is one in a series of distance education faculty development mini-courses. This course, Managing your Distance Course, cover many tips to help you successfully manage certain teaching tasks in the online environment.

- Overview: General discussion on the modules and the content.
- Module 1: Communicating with students takes a great deal of time and effort. Certain management strategies may help you successfully communicate with students while maintaining adequate instructor presence.
- Module 2: Tired of going from place to place in your course to assign grades and provide feedback - the Assignment Tool is a must learn for all distance educators.
- Module 3: You can streamline your assessment by entering all questions into a pool of questions and then pulling various questions for particular assessment purposes.
- Module 4: Tired of spending more time scrolling to find items in the gradebook than you spend assigning grades? This module feature tips on organizing your gradebook and using Blackboard tools to identify student trends.
- Conclusion: Supporting resources for your use.

Having a communication strategy and using specific strategies to manage the amount of responses required by instructors may reduce some of the workload in the distance course. It will certainly organize and document communications with students. The Assignment Tool will organize the task of locating and grading student assignments. Using test pools provides a great amount of variety in what you can do with assessments. If you plan certain categories in the gradebook, you can sort and filter for certain information, reducing the amount of scrolling for information you have to do to enter grades and comments.

This isn't a cookbook approach at all. We encourage you to use strategies that make sense for your instructional style and to discard strategies that you don't like. If something looks promising but you don't know if you have the technical skills - contact your instructional designer.

We want you to be successful and we will work with you to learn to manage your course in the way that you feel makes sense for you.

Overview - Managing Your Distance Course

Associate Professor Gray teaches two online courses and it is time to grade final projects for the semester. She has thirty emails in her in-box from one course with multi-page attachments. She also has twenty-five emails from her other course with attachments. She has messages from the various committees she is on that have come in over the last two days. She needs to finish and post final exams for both courses before the weekend.

Does this sound familiar? Managing a distance course takes careful preparation to manage the amount of submissions required in this delivery mode. Failure to plan may result in a reactive approach to the work inherent in the distance course.

Four areas of the distance course seem to lend themselves to management strategies: Communication with Students, Managing Written Assignments, Managing Assessments, and Managing Grade Related Items.

Communications with Students - Managing Your Distance Course

A great deal of communication in a distance course can be managed with proactive strategies. The crux of much communication in the distance course centers on the discussion area. The discussion board can take an enormous amount of your time if you feel the need to respond to every student posting. Instructor presence is crucial to the success of a distance course and impacts how students perceive the course. But presence does not require that you be in the course 24 hours a day and answer every question. Presence can be managed by implementing two strategies. The first is the amount of time you need to thoughtfully respond to student postings. There is pressure to respond immediately but we encourage you to resist the temptation. We believe it is far more important to establish a window of time for your responses and to attempt to consistently respond within this window of time. Clearly establish your expected response time and keep to the schedule. You will be able to respond quickly to emergencies and respond to the postings you choose according to the schedule you establish. If you will be unable to respond within your window, inform students as soon as you know. This simple courtesy shows respect and preempts numerous questions from students.

The second strategy is about your planned selection of certain types of responses for certain discussion items. It is quite acceptable to respond to individuals, to small groups, and to the entire class. The types of responses you choose also shape how your instructor presence is perceived. A mixture of individual responses, summaries, group postings, and other strategies provides variety, reduces the amount of instructor generated responses, and maintains instructor presence.

The TWU Instructional Design team has created an entire mini-course on the discussion board that you may want to view to learn more about setting the environment for discussion and using a response strategy to maintain instructor presence while reducing the total number of posts that must come from you. You will find direct links to the entire course and to selected content on the course in the links box on this page. Use the back button on your browser to return to this course.

Plan your Communication Strategy - Managing your Distance Course

A proactive approach to communication is to make a plan for how and when you will communicate with students. You should attempt to make sure that each student receives some individual communication from you. We suggest that you first review your discussion prompts to see which of these lend themselves to individual responses. Next, locate any of the Forum that require a small group response. Finally, determine if you will be summarizing the threads posted by students for the entire group to read.

This simple strategy provides a plan to respond to individuals, small groups, and to the large group. We suggest you couple this with some tracking mechanism.

Example:

The discussion area is where we try to have conversations, even though we are separated by time and geography. Your responsibility is to be thoughtful about the content, to demonstrate that you can apply the content, and to view your classmates as co-learners and co-teachers. All of you have unique expertise and varied experiences that will help others to understand and apply content. I expect you to communicate in the discussion area and I expect you to make connections with other students outside the discussion area. I will respond to discussion postings using a variety of techniques. At times, I will respond individually to each of you. Sometimes, I will not respond to the discussion until the discussion has concluded. I will provide a summary posting that compares and contrasts responses throughout the discussion. Don't be surprised if I mention your name at some point in these types of responses. Sometimes, you will be required to work as a group and post a collective response to a Forum. I will respond to each of these collective responses. At other times, I will read all posts but not respond. I will always tell you beforehand so you are not expecting some type of response from me.

We have provided an example of a simple tracking sheet in the Examples box found on this page. You can use the back button in your browser to return to this page.

Email vs. "Write Once so Many can Read" - Managing your Distance Course

All of us are very used to using email for common correspondence. Someone sends a message and you respond. Students attach assignments and you review them. Sounds pretty simple – doesn't it?

You should realize that a course sets up a ratio of 1: the number of students in course. Without some management strategies, you will have a large number of individual messages in your in-box each week over the course of the semester. Remember, if the course is entirely online you won't have the opportunity to informally talk with students before/after class or during the break. If you accept assignments as attachments, you will also have to develop some type of management strategy for all of the attachments.

Distance courses allow you to 'write once so many can read.' Using the Announcement and discussion board features, you can provide information and/or answer questions by posting one message. You do have to provide information to students about the tools you will use and the expectations you have for them to read and review discussion forums dedicated to questions.

Example:

In the discussion board area, you will find a Forum titled Course Questions. This is the location I expect you to use to ask questions about the course. I also expect you to check the questions and responses to make sure your question has not already been addressed. I will check this Forum regularly and respond.

Use the Subscribe to Threads Function to Notify of Questions on the Discussion Board - Managing your Distance Course

One of the practices we recommend is to create special discussion boards to house questions about the course (often labeled as FAQs or Q and A). You can create a single forum for questions or categorize questions about different aspects of the course into separate forums. Once you create the forum(s), you can use another feature to notify you via email each time a student posts to the board. This feature can save you time and effort by only going to these boards when you know you have a question to answer.

When you create this Forum, be sure to go to Forum Settings and enable Allow members to subscribe to threads. DO NOT enable Allow members to create new threads. After creating a forum for questions, post the first thread to the forum. The one we have found most useful is "Submit all questions by clicking on this thread and replying. Your reply to the thread will be your question about the course." We also suggest you disable the students' ability to post new threads to this forum.

Make sure you subscribe to this thread in order to be notified via email when someone posts a question about the course.

Using Announcements - Managing your Distance Course

Announcements are the most visible location in the course for providing general information to the class. This is another location where you can “write once and have it read by many.” Announcements are most effective if used to announce important information to the entire class (i.e., time sensitive information, reminders of due dates, notice that content has changed, announcing that exams have been posted in the gradebook, etc.).

Example:

I just wanted to tell all of you how much I enjoyed the introductions and the comments that were posted for the activity. You are a diverse group with some very interesting experiences. I was especially pleased to see some of you make connections with other students. This is exactly what you should do to be successful in a distance course. As many of you are discovering, research as we discuss it in this course, is very different from the way that most people talk about research. Research has a regimented set of procedures that should be followed to yield valid results. Before you are ready to actually conduct your own research, you must learn how to write a good literature review and spend considerable time reviewing the literature. The literature is your friend. It is your guide to understanding the depth of your topic and your guide to understanding what others have done before you. The literature will yield the methods and approaches that have been done and serve to guide you toward developing a study that is researchable. I repeat – the literature is your friend. Don’t slight your intellectual growth by looking at a review of literature as merely an exercise – it is an opportunity for you to begin to think like a researcher

Managing Written Assignments for the Distance Course - Managing your Distance Course

In the traditional face-to-face classroom, written papers and projects are turned in to the instructor for grading during class sessions. Most instructors create routines to handle collecting and managing the papers until the grading is complete and the papers are returned to the students.

The Assignment feature in Blackboard is invaluable in managing student assignments and submissions in a similar manner. This feature provides a single location to send assignment directions and information to students while providing students with a single location to upload assignments and comments. This tool automatically creates an item in the gradebook and has features to help instructors manage assignments.

- Automatically creates gradebook entries for each assignment
- Allows time-release options
- Setting availability dates makes the assignments disappear, stopping students from submitting late assignments
- Sets one gradebook item per assignment, unlike the Digital Dropbox where multiple files appear as multiple entries in the gradebook
- Instructor can access all student files and comments from the gradebook
- Grades given to assignments automatically appear in the gradebook
- Instructors have the ability to download one, some, or all student submissions from the gradebook
- Submissions can be downloaded to the instructor's desktop, feedback added, and the file uploaded to the student in the assignment tool

Example:

Name: HW1

Instructions: In this assignment, I ask you to identify possible instances of researcher bias. The attachment contains two scenarios you should review, looking for examples of researcher bias (there are many examples in each scenario).

After reading the scenarios, use the text box to submit a minimum of 4 possible examples of bias (copy the exact phrase from the original and then provide your explanation about why you believe this meets the conditions described in the section on researcher bias.

Assignment Files: Homework_1_08S1.doc (Homework_1_08S1.doc)

Managing Assessments for the Distance Course

Creating and managing assessment for your course can be somewhat streamlined if you know how to take advantage of the tools available. The Pool Manager tool is an excellent resource for creating both exams and practice assessments.

The Pool Manager allows you to create "pools" of questions that can then be distributed once, or many times, as exams and practice assessments. In addition, these pools can be copied between courses to make setting up your class for next semester easier. And, if you like, you can continue to add to these pools over several semesters to create a much more robust source for testing.

So, how do you use the Pool Manager? It works just like the Test Manager and Survey Manager, only you don't assign any points to the questions you create. You create your questions in Pool Manager and save them. Then, when you want to create an exam or practice assessment, you use Test Manager or Survey Manager and select the option to create questions "from a pool or assessment". This will then allow you to select the appropriate pool of questions, determine what kinds of questions you want to use (multiple choice, short answer, etc.), and, if you are creating a test, assign a point value.

One of the most beneficial options of using the Pool Manager is that it allows you to utilize the Random Block function in Test Manager or Survey Manager. This option allows you to pull a certain number of questions at random from a pool. The benefits of this for instructional purposes is that each student will receive an individualized exam. Or, if you are creating a practice exam, the student will receive a different selection of the questions each time they take the exam, giving them a more well-rounded practice session.

Plan and Review your Gradebook - Managing your Distance Course

When I first started teaching, paper gradebooks were the normal way to manage and record grades. You had to write in all student names and then write the assignment titles. Even these gradebooks used some tricks to minimize the amount of writing. Perforated tabs allowed the teacher to write the class roll one time and then use that roll for multiple grading periods by turning back or tearing out the tabs. When Learning Management Systems (like Blackboard) first appeared, you often had to enter all assignment titles in the gradebook. Many of you still enter all grade categories into the gradebook because that is how you learned the system.

The system has changed! In today's Learning Management Systems, several items will automatically create gradebook items for you. If you use the Assignments, Test Manager, and Grade Forum features; categories will be automatically created in the gradebook.

Implications: If you manually create your gradebook items and then use any of the tools that automatically enter items into the gradebook you get duplicate categories. If you have ever had to go through the entire gradebook and delete duplicate categories - you know what I mean.

Plan: We suggest you list your categories in another location and then go into the tools. Use tools that will automatically create gradebook items for you.

Review: Refer to your list of categories and review your gradebook to make sure that all categories are represented. Next, go to Manage Items in the Gradebook and place the categories in the exact order that you want them to appear in your gradebook.

Managing the Gradebook for the Distance Course - Managing your Distance Course

Blackboard's Gradebook can make your life easier but be aware that it doesn't function exactly like a gradebook based on a spreadsheet. It takes some getting used to but once you learn how to call for what you want – life is much easier. If you don't learn the features, you will need to scroll repeatedly to locate and input grades into the correct locations.

The Gradebook operates best using categories. Each column in the Gradebook can use a category (some are assigned by you and others are assigned by Blackboard) for sorting and filtering purposes. If you create an exam or choose to grade discussion forums, Blackboard will automatically create categories and columns for you in the Gradebook. If you want to assign categories, a number of predetermined categories are available for your use or you can create your own categories using Manage Gradebook Categories.

The significance of categories is that you can sort and filter your gradebook by these categories. If you assign categories, Blackboard will group all similar categories together for you using Sort. You can use Filter to pull up only specific categories (meaning you do not have to see the rest of the gradebook).

How do you enter these categories? When you create an assignment using the assignment tool, you list title, points, and due date. Blackboard will automatically create a column in the Gradebook and categorize this as an assignment. Forum grade is the default category for discussion forums in the Gradebook. If you manually add an assignment to the Gradebook, you select the most appropriate category.

As you develop assignments and examination, remember that category, date, possible points, title, and weight are all possible ways to sort Gradebook information. Having a plan in place to determine categories will assist you to make your Gradebook manageable.

A quick way to sort users is to enter the first letter of the last name in the Filter Users by Last Name area. This allows you to quickly see all users

whose last name begins with that letter to quickly locate a particular student.

Tracking Trends and Notifying Students in the Distance Course - Managing your Distance Course

The Early Warning System (EWS) is a feature that can help you track trends in student performance and allow you to communicate with students about these trends. The EWS allows you to establish rules (predefined criterion) for grades, due dates, and last access.

- **Grade Rule:** Identifies when student performance on an item is equal to or below a certain level.
- **Due Date:** Identifies when a student does not complete course work when it is due (only works with Assignments or Assessments created through Blackboard. Due Date Rules cannot be created for manually graded items).
- **Last Access:** Identifies the last time a Student accessed the course online.

If a student meets the criteria for a rule, instructors have the option to email students a notification by clicking on their user name. A comprehensive log tracks the notification activity for each course as initiated through the EWS

The Performance Dashboard is a good location to get information on student access to the course, to check if students have reviewed material (if you used the Review feature), and to see detailed information on the discussion board (average, minimum, and maximum post lengths) in a central location. This is a useful feature if you have length requirements for the discussion board. The biggest advantage to this feature is that all students in the course can be accessed for review rather than checking data on an individual basis.

- **Last Course Access:** This column shows the date that the student last accessed the course.
- **Days Since Last Course Access:** This column gives a quick view of how many days have passed since the student last accessed the course.
- **Review Status:** This column shows the number of items marked as reviewed by each student.
- **Adaptive Release:** This column links to any Adaptive Release information in the course and displays what course information and

areas are currently available to the student.

- Discussion Board: This column lists the number of discussion posts by each student. Important: We have noticed inaccuracies in the post counts presented through the performance dashboard, so this should really just be used as a starting point for assessing posting information for the students.
- Early Warning System: If you are using the Early Warning System in your course, this column will show what rules the student has met.
- View Grades: This allows you to go to each student's grade list, which is the same gradebook user information from the gradebook.

Conclusion - Managing your Distance Course

- Lorenzetti, Jennifer Patterson. (2007) Setting Boundaries: Four Tips for Managing Your Time Online and Not Letting Your Work Consume Your Life. Distance Education Report; Vol. 11 Issue 15, 1-7.
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